

ANARCHY ALIVE!

An Interview with Uri Gordon

“People don’t know what anarchism stands for, don’t know its history, because nobody ever mentions it in the information channels that most people have access to.”
– Uri Gordon

Interview conducted by Richard Capes for www.moretht.blogspot.com
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(visit the ‘More Thought’ blog for a free MP3 of this interview)

R = Richard Capes
U = Uri Gordon

R: Hello. My name is Richard Capes, and this is a [moretht.blogspot.com](http://www.moretht.blogspot.com) interview with Israeli anarchist theorist and activist Uri Gordon about his book ‘Anarchy Alive! Anti-Authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory’.

Okay, Uri, my first question is this:

In everyday language, ‘anarchy’ means chaos and disorder. Is that what anarchists want?

U: Well, obviously not. Anarchy – the original Greek meaning doesn’t mean lack of order; it means lack of rulers. Anarchy stands for a social order without rulers, a social order that is based on mutual aid, voluntary association, direct ownership of the land and the factories by the workers. Anarchy is simply a form of socialism, only without government. That’s what anarchists have always meant by it. It is a term that was used historically also to deride democrats, people who were against the monarchy in 18th century France. And until today it is something that’s been associated with chaos and disorder in the popular mind, but in fact it simply means a social order without rulers, a social order that is based on full political equality.

R: Why do anarchists reject government and the state?

U: I think it comes from a basic belief in the essential equality of all human beings. Anarchists tend to believe that government and the state are forceful structures that both impose on the individual and orient them in a certain path for their life, and limit their choices in a way that is not justified. And also the state and government uphold the class system, which gives a very small minority of people extreme privilege in terms of their ownership of land and factories, like I said, as well as political power. So the state is understood as this kind of pyramid structure that is artificial to human relations, that is some kind of historical accident that humans can live just as well without.

R: Is it true that anarchists are opposed to democracy?

U: This is a complicated one. Some anarchists see anarchism simply as the logical extension of democracy and identify it with direct democracy – a form of democracy without any elections or without any representation. However, if we view democracy as a process for arriving at collectively

binding decisions which are then somehow supposed to be enforced, then we have a certain problem because anarchists don't believe in enforcement, they don't believe in having a permanent structure, of coercing people into obeying decisions. If that's what democracy means then I think anarchists would be against it.

R: How do anarchists think social change can be brought?

U: For the most part, I would say anarchists see several ways of changing the world. One is to constantly de-legitimise and criticise the existing society and get more and more people to understand that the way that people live their lives today - with things like wage labour, and top-down political structures, and inequality between men and women, or between different ethnic groups, or between different ages – is not in any way natural or inevitable.

The second one is to start already today creating alternative ways of living, to build collective forms of economy – communes, cooperatives, independent media sites, squatted social centres, the free software movement, the free hardware movement. – All of these as kinds of ways of carving out independent spaces within the existing society, to create a new society within the shell of the existing society. Through these measures we're trying to build towards and encourage the development of a mass movement. And I think that we are right now speaking in the midst of a global wave of protest against what most of the participants see as the excesses of big corporations, and banks, and so on. Anarchists try to participate in these movements, contribute to them and introduce or encourage a more radical critique, which doesn't seek only to reform capitalism, but to overthrow it.

So these three things - de-legitimation, construction of alternatives, and participation in mass movements – are the hallmarks of contemporary anarchist strategy.

R: Is contemporary anarchism a direct continuation of the nineteenth-and early twentieth century anarchist movement?

U: Personally, I would not say so, because I think that it's a clear fact that a large part of the anarchist movement in North America, in Western Europe, was physically wiped out between the first and second world wars – whether by fascist or Bolshevik dictatorships. And the anarchist movement that we see today is kind of a revival of anarchist values in the intersection among other social movements since the late 60s, which didn't initially see themselves as explicitly anarchist. But the way in which movements - like radical feminism and ecology, and anti-racism, and anti-colonial movements, and animal rights movements, and gay liberation movements, and any other number of movements - found their common causes and came to see their own specific agendas as a particular case of a wider opposition to domination, to social hierarchy as such – at that intersection that's where the contemporary anarchist movement kind of came together. I'd say that we're definitely looking today at a kind of Anarchism 2.0 for the new millennium, which is distinct in some significant ways from the older movement - among other things because it's not anymore a mass movement of impoverished workers and peasants, but more of a minority force within wider social movements, which attracts the less alienated and more politically sensitised parts of mostly younger populations, we should admit. And that I think makes some difference in terms of the role of anarchism in contemporary movements, and also in terms of its diversity, in terms of its openness to new ideas, and in terms of its future prospects.

R: Is it true that anarchists don't have a fixed set of ideas or beliefs that they rigidly follow?

U: I think that's right and I think it's an important distinction to Marxism, for example, where, at least in the orthodox sections, you're supposed to agree with a certain party line and know how to talk robotically this line. In anarchism that doesn't happen. Because Marxism has a practice that's read off theory - and with anarchism it's the opposite - what you believe is much less important at a certain point than what you do, to be accepted as an ally. And that is participating in certain practices, of both destructive and constructive direct action, in networking, in practices of horizontal, consensus-based decision making. This is the essence of it – it's doing things. It's not a question of having the right theory or the right debates. I think those debates are only worthwhile as an ongoing discussion.

R: Is anarchism an ideology then?

U: I think there are some essential markers. I think there is an anarchist ideology. I think you can articulate a set of values or concepts that are central in anarchism, at least historically as well as in the contemporary movement. And you can see where they come from as well. So, I'd say there are at least three things. One is a general critique of domination, of all patterns of hierarchy in society, which emphasises the intersections of various forms of oppression and various struggles for liberation, and is opposed to any dynamic where people are oppressed and controlled and discriminated against, and violated in contemporary society. So that's one thing: a critique of domination.

The other thing I think is this idea of a prefigurative politics. Again you take direct action as action that seeks to create the world that you want. And that means that the actions you do now are the seed of a new society in the shell of the existing one. So the means are always shaped by the ends. And this is this idea of prefigurative politics that is very meaningful in anarchism in that it's kind of why there are practices of direct democracy inside the movement, because we want to be the change that we want to see in the world, as Gandhi once said. So people want to practice – it's not just that you practice what you preach, it's that the practices by themselves are social change. So this is the second aspect of prefigurative politics.

And a third thing is almost an anti-thing. It's the experimentalism, the emphasis on diversity as a value, on creativity, on otherness, on transgression. All this kind of tool-box of non-normative attitudes, or anti-normative attitudes – is a third thing. And that's what allows for so much diversity of viewpoints, whether theoretical or spiritual or otherwise. To attach themselves to anarchist values and to see them as an expression of whatever is there own, you know, comprehensive world-view. I think anarchism shouldn't be seen as a comprehensive world-view. I think it's first of all a political practice and certain ways of acting in and reflecting on a non-hierarchical society, and ways of manifesting that, as well as fighting against a hierarchical society. You can be a Buddhist anarchist, an atheist anarchist; you can be an ecologically aware nature-connected anarchist. You can be an industrial-worker machinist anarchist with a view of progress and positive technology. These things are always in flux. I think the political practice, the thinking about it, is kind of a smaller-scale thing than a comprehensive world-view, if you see what I mean.

R: Why do anarchists seek to build society from below? Why are they opposed to taking power from above?

U: First, because of the experience of 150 years of socialist history. It teaches us that power whether by parliamentary means or by a coup d'état doesn't lead to a classless society. It didn't work parliamentarily in Germany. It was a social-democratic government that oppressed the 1919 revolutions. And it didn't work in Russia, where the dictatorship of the proletariat didn't lead to the withering away of the state, but lead to a totalitarian nightmare. So it's clear from history. It's something that bore out the criticism that anarchists had been raising against statist tactics since the First International. So that's the one thing.

The other thing is that anarchists want to have a correspondence between their means and their ends. This is what prefigurative politics means. It means that you get there by doing it. By starting to practice it. You can't change the system with the same tools and ways of thinking that sustain that same system.

R: How would you respond to the argument that without a state we'd be in a kind of Hobbesian condition of nature where life would be 'nasty, brutish, and short'?

U: Well, Thomas Hobbes, when he wrote Leviathan, and described a stateless society as a war of all against all was more describing what was happening with the partial dissolution of the British state during the Civil War than a state of nature as people might descend to it or move onward to it if they abolished the state themselves. We're not talking about a state disappearing overnight. We're talking about a social process where people revolutionise society in a way that the state no longer exists along with the class system and the entire apparatus of domination. The revolutionary process itself is also what generates the social solidarity and mutual aid that ensure the continuance of normal human relationships without a state. They decide it as a result of a revolutionary process however long it may take – weeks or generations. If we're talking about the state of nature as some imagined actual form of human society then most or all human societies until about ten-thousand years ago were stateless societies.

The state began with the city states of Mesopotamia, and Egypt was only maybe only about 8,000 years ago. So everything outside of that, including in the colonized world, was essentially in conditions of anarchy – better functioning, less-well functioning, it doesn't matter, but that's how human beings lived. They didn't all kill each other. Humanity wouldn't have survived. Humanity survived because people who lived with their own family members tend to practice quite generous and sharing modes of human life. But since today we live largely in mass societies and not in small bands then we need to – we can rely upon some instinctual mutual aid, but it's not enough. And the revolutionary process takes care of that. So if the state disappeared overnight, I'm not sure what would happen. I think a lot of small military groups would try to reconstitute states. Somalia is talked about as in anarchy – it's not in anarchy. It's a few mini states or people who would like to be a state competing with each other. That's war, it's not anarchy.

R: Do anarchists have a fixed model for the kind of society they would like?

U: I think they're more united in what they don't want it to have than in what they do. I think that increasingly contemporary anarchists and their allies are realising that there are essential ecological limits on our imagining of a future society. I think there's a tying of the understanding that social organization should be decentralized for social and political reasons and that it will inevitably become decentralized for ecological reasons, by hook or by crook. I think more and more anarchists are realising that we're going into a scenario of decline, collapse, and decay of

industrial civilization, and are beginning to think about where they can intervene in order to move that process politically towards more free and equal conditions, rather than some kind of eco-feudalism. So there aren't any blueprints in terms of, you know, we have a utopia, we have a perfect imagined thing. I think what matters is looking at the concrete conditions that will accompany humanity in the next decades, and think of ways in which we can pull them towards more free and equal and solidaric human relations. You're not working from some blueprint of what you want to achieve. You're working from the concrete political moment inspired by values and a projection of future history.

R: Is it possible that anarchism is a never-ending struggle?

U: At its basis I think it is. Not because the state can't be abolished. I don't know if it can or can't be abolished. But because I think there is a moment in the anarchist attitude that is always looking for hidden forms of domination and oppression even in a society that is nominally or actually classless and stateless. I mean if you read Ursula Le Guin's book 'The Dispossessed' – that's really strong there, this idea that revolution needs revolutionaries, even though there is no moment when the revolution is completed. It's not a moment anyway; it's a process. And yeah, on the fundamental level it's never complete because you always need to challenge authoritarian patterns of behaviour or new groups that rise that want to conquer everybody else. You have to fight against that. There is no full-proof situation. The struggle for human freedom never ends as long as there are things that people can monopolise to give them power over others.

R: You say in the book that many anarchists are reluctant to call themselves anarchists. Why is that?

U: Well, to begin with, there is the active vilification of anarchism as an ideology that seeks chaos and destruction, and so on. People don't know that anarchism is about socialism without government, or about a decentralized society, and all of those things. They're still associated with bomb throwers. They had the same role in the 19th century that today's Islamic terrorists have. But anarchists only ever killed heads of state and so on, and that was over a hundred years ago. They never killed masses of civilians. So this is one thing: people don't know what anarchism stands for, don't know its history, because nobody ever mentions it in the information channels that most people have access to.

R: Why is that?

U: It has to do, in part, with – I mean this is a vilification that in a hundred years ago was also for socialists in general, and unionists, and anarchists, and women liberationists. They were all in the same pot that was marked 'menaces to society', as 'dangers'. It's about the level of vilification that movements for social change in general always face. Whether or not anarchists play up to that – I think that there is definitely a question around violence. Anarchism certainly has a violent history. So do all socialist movements and national liberation movements, and so on. And anarchists need to come to terms with this history even if they make a strategical and/or ethical choice for non-violence as I do.

The other thing is that anarchists themselves don't want to associate themselves with any single label, even if they get to define the content completely. They don't like tags and labels. Anarchist become an identity, becomes something over which there are power struggles. It's misused by

anarchists themselves. And in general anarchists are people who, I think, like to transgress borders and boundaries, and don't want any fixed identity. So the idea that an anarchist identity could gel, or has gelled in the past, and so on, also keeps people away from that title explicitly.

R: How did you become an anarchist?

U: I think I started calling myself anarchist when I was 12 years-old or something, when I first heard the term. And at that point I kind of understood it to mean a belief that people are born good and that all of the anti-social behaviours are the result of society's pressure on the individual. It fit very well with my non-conformist attitude as a youngster. I became active politically as an anarchist through the environmental movement in the late 90s - where I was participating in protests against highway construction and other destruction of nature - and through experiencing things like police brutality, and witnessing collusion between politicians and corporations, and in moving projects forward, and similar things. And through reading some literature, and so on, I just came to the conclusion that the domination of nature by humans is inextricably linked to the domination of humans by humans. And I came to reject all social hierarchy and authority as a result.

R: Were any members of your family anarchists?

U: My grandfather's uncle was an anarchist, and he was active in the Yiddish speaking anarchist movement in the United States. He edited the works of the Yiddish anarchist poet David Edelstadt. This is back in the 30s or something. There's another kind of member of the wide Gordon family: David Gordon, who was one of the spiritual leaders of the kibbutz movement in its earliest days in Palestine in the 1910s. He also was an anarchist by the current standard, though he never called himself that. It's claimed that there's an anarchist gene that runs in the Gordon family and comes out every few generations.

R: You said that when you were 12 you believed that people were born good. Do you still believe that?

U: The only thing I can say about people is that they're naturally social. They want to live with other human beings and they want to interact with them. I don't think people are born either good or bad. I think that whether people are competitive or cooperative, or whether they treat their fellow humans as equal or as inferior, depends on their education, on their culture, on the messages that they get throughout their lives. And I think that the type of society that we live in is going to determine what is the overall and most common way in which people treat one another. So I don't have any kind of reliance on an account of an essential human nature in order to justify my beliefs. I think that it's kind of the other way around. I don't think there's anything essential about humans that create society. I think that the forms of society are the ones that generate certain human behaviours and attitudes. I think that in a society that encourages cooperation and voluntarism and mutual aid – that's the behaviour that we'll see most of the time. Currently, we live in a society that encourages competition, encourages alienation, encourages either commanding or obeisance, and - no surprise - that that's the behaviours we see most of the time. So we need to change our social structures, and that will lead to a change in people's behaviours and mutual expectations.

R: What would you say to someone who was convinced that humans are born evil?

U: I think it's useful to ask those people: 'Are you selfish? Are you evil? Are your friends, the people you know, and your family – are they like that?' And they'll usually say, 'No, but most people are.' I think it's quite easy to get past that because people don't actually think that about themselves. They don't actually think that of other people they know. It doesn't take that much to convert people, because I think mostly that attitude is an excuse for hopelessness, or an excuse for laziness to take action and change the way the world works.

R: At the start of your book, you say anarchism is “alive and kicking”. Could you discuss some recent examples of anarchist activity?

U: The last ten years or more have seen anarchists at the forefront of, firstly, the anti-globalisation movement in Western countries. And the people who have remained the most active through the downturn, through the anti-war movement, the aftermath of the anti-war movement, the paralysis of the American Left following the Obama victory, and, you know, increasing right-wing governments in Europe – the anarchists continued to be active throughout this thing and I think they kept the flame between that last big cycle of struggle to the one we're experiencing right now.

And I think the values that we're seeing in the occupy movement right now, of direct democracy, of know hierarchies, we're creating the world that we want to live in, and we're against capitalism, and we see that capitalism and the state are intertwined – this is anarchism. I'm sure many of the people participating wouldn't like to call themselves that. That's fine. Many of them have lesser goals in mind than the abolition of a class society. But I think they're anarchist values, anarchist practices, the whole ethos of direct action – it's all there. With the recent wave of struggle, I think that all of the work that anarchists and their allies have been doing for the last ten-twelve years has finally paid off. Let's say since that pin in our balloon in September 11th 2001.

R: Some have criticised the occupy movement for failing to undermine the system in any way. Do you agree with this criticism?

U: It's a protest movement. It's not supposed to do that. That's the delegitimizing part. You undermine it by creating alternative ways of exchanging and producing and consuming what we need. You create alternative economies. You fight within the existing economy. You strike. You take industrial action. You do all of these things. You create a public space in the street that displays direct democracy. These things – if there was no attempt at repressing them, who knows where they would escalate. I mean you have a huge crowd of 500 people on Wall St. God knows what would happen in terms of the information systems that are there if there wasn't a police force. So, yes, it's not making a revolution in the streets now, because it's faced by a much stronger armed force.

It's limited to the goal of a protest movement. That's what a protest movement does. It highlights injustices and it displays alternatives. But everyday attempts to undermine the system are what counts in the long run - what happens between these protest waves. That's something that people involved in this movement will have to be strengthening as an infrastructure of resistance that can carry on after this wave is also waned.

R: I interviewed Mark Fisher about his book ‘Capitalist Realism’ a few weeks ago and asked him what he thought about the occupy movement. In his answer, he said: “It seems to me

that these negative protest-based movements – if they're to have any lasting impact – must transform into robust organisations that have institutional structures and a positive agenda." Do you agree with him?

U: No, of course not. I think he's mistaken both in his diagnosis and in his agenda. I don't think that these movements are wholly negative at all. In fact, I think that we see in the occupy movement a very shining example of how people can organise in a way that's different from capitalism. The politics of popular assemblies, of consensus decision-making, of mutual aid, of self-sufficiency, that we see on the ground in these protest movements are an example in laboratory form, if you will, of the basic structures for decision-making and self-management that anarchists seek to universalise in the society in general.

Political institutions and so on – I think that's only really relevant if you're trying to negotiate with power or to become those in power. In that way you kind of have to mirror the enemy that you're seeking to fight in order to become like it and be able to confront it on its own battleground. But anarchists seek something else. We're not looking to catch political power. We're looking to decentralise political power. So, all of these calls for institutionalisation and formalisation are to my mind a step that would massively weaken the movement and take it off course.

R: Are you happy with the way in which the movement is developing at the moment, or would you like to see it take a different direction?

U: It doesn't really matter what I want or don't want because social movements have their own dynamics. In a way, I see what's going on now as a kind of more sophisticated and better managed re-run of what we saw with the counter-globalisation movement in the last decade – in the sense that there is a mix of more veteran activists who have been around the block once, at least, who usually have a more systematic critique of society and are against capitalism in principle. And then you have an influx of a lot of new people who may still be a bit less cynical about the prospects of reforming the system. That's what happens with every cycle of social struggle. It's a learning process. I don't have any illusion that the current occupy movement is going to lead to a world-wide revolution. But I think it's another step in the political self-education of the wide population in advanced capitalist countries, and, as such, I see it in a very positive light.

R: The British police force recently urged members of the public to immediately report anyone they suspected of being an anarchist. Why do you think they did this?

U: They retracted that as well and kind of apologised for it, didn't they? I think mainly what happened was that police forces got a lot of budgets in order to deal with Islamic terrorists who were going to bomb people and murder them. But they didn't find enough of those, so they have to justify their budgets. And in order to do that they're going after other groups, like animal rights groups, like anarchist groups, like environmental groups. They're kind of widening the definition of terrorism, I think, mainly for bureaucratic and budgetary reason – that's in terms of like how, you know, thinking about how police forces and bureaucracies function.

In addition to that I think that in an important sense governments are even more threatened by non-violent social change forces than they are by violent ones. Violent ones they know how to deal with – they can count on the fear of the population from. But non-violent movements are

something that constitutes a genuine threat to the established order. They have much more of a chance than violent movements of becoming a mass phenomenon. So on the structural level I think that elites today feel – and very justifiably feel – that the legitimacy of capitalism as a system is weakening, and so they're anxious to go after those forces in society that are making that illegitimacy of capitalism most manifest and articulating it in the most explicit way.

R: Could the British police's interest in having people report on anarchists be a sign that anarchism is becoming more popular?

U: There are two different things. I think that in terms of an explicit anarchist critique of society or a desire for a society without government – I'm not sure about that. But I'm quite sure that anarchist ways of organising, anarchist ways of doing politics, anarchist ways of confronting the established order, are definitely becoming the centre of the repertoire of social movements in advanced capitalist countries. Again, if you look at the occupy movement right now we see a movement that even if it has reformist aims, it has anarchist means – means such as direct democracy, decentralised organisation, consensus decision-making, non-profit voluntary association. All of these ways of organising have been developed by the anarchist movement over the last 150 years or so. I think that Anarchism has replaced Marxism as the focal point and the main motor of inspiration for social movements in the richer parts of the world.

R: Why is the subtitle of your book 'anti-authoritarian politics from practice to theory'?

U: Because it was important to me to forward a form of anarchist theory that directly draws on anarchist practice. That is, I don't want to do anarchist theory that begins from somewhere abstract, begins from concepts or terms or ideas. I want theory to be based on the actual discussions and dilemmas that activists have in their everyday work, and to respond to those. So, I want to begin with the practice and employ theory that is informed by this practice and goes back to inform it in turn.

R: In the first chapter of the book you look at anarchism as social movement, a political culture, and a collection of ideas. Could you briefly tell us how it is each of these?

U: I say that as a social movement it has its own networks and structures, it's decentralized, it involves things like affinity groups and spokes councils and local projects, and various forms of participation and wider coalitions. There are cultural activities. There are friendship networks. That's the social movement level, and it does actions that can mostly be classified under the term 'direct action', meaning action without mediators, where you don't appeal to a court or a politician to rectify a situation for us or to prevent an injustice, but we confront that injustice and create the alternative on the ground where it is happening. I think this is a principle that we find expressed a lot in a lot of actions that are affiliated with anarchism. And that's kind of the central activity.

And then you can move from that to what animates that - what is going on in people's minds, and what are people saying. And this is the aspect of culture. It's a way of doing things and a way of talking about how we do things. And then you have these kind of cultural practices, cultural codes, like networking, like confrontational as well as creative forms of action. You've got all of this discussion going on about priorities and values, and what's going to happen, and what should we do. And less about high theory, you know, 'What is the exact nature of the relationship between capitalism and the state?'

But that activity of talking about things is where a lot of valuable political theorizing takes place among people in political struggle. So there is also a theoretical dimension. It's a theoretical dimension that comes from combining reflection on some basic values that have run along the anarchist tradition – values like freedom and equality and solidarity, taken to their logical anti-capitalist, anti-state conclusions. And the reflection is the theory. So, any theorist - anything the professional theorist, so to speak, or someone who has special training because of their privilege and their time, like me - all they can do is take this conversation that is happening with so many voices, and try to pull out some of the recurring questions, and try to pull out some of the recurring key words and terms, and create an intelligible relationship between them – as something to give back to people who want to reflect on their practice and want some ideas to bounce off of in the dilemmas that they face. That's kind of what I try to do in the main part of the book.

R: One of the topics you explore in the main part of the book is violence. Do you think violence should ever be used for political ends?

U: I think violence, ideally, should be eradicated from human society. I think that all things being equal, less violence is always better than more. I think that it's more useful and more valuable to use non-violent means than violent ones. At the same time, I don't criticise those who use certain forms of violence – self-defensive violence against armed forces to forward political ends from a position of weakness, from a position of self-defence. It's not something I would participate in, but it's not something that I would be so keen to criticise. On the other hand, I don't think that violence is ever justified against unarmed civilians.

R: Are you saying you wouldn't participate in violence even if you were acting from a position of self-defence?

U: I don't think it's decent of me to answer that question in the abstract, when I'm sitting comfortably opposite a computer. I don't know. All I can say is that for me as an individual, I hate violence. I don't like using it. If someone comes on the street and tries to knife me, then I'll defend myself, of course. That's not really a political situation, as you mentioned. So, I don't know. I mean it's not something that can really be discussed hypothetically. It's something that can only be made sense of after the event.

R: Would you describe yourself as a pacifist?

U: I'm definitely a pacifist in the sense that I object to all wars. In my ideal world there are no purpose made weapons. I want the dissolution of all organised violent forces, like armies. In that classical sense I'm certainly a pacifist. I'm not a pacifist in another sense – that all violence can never be justified, because I could justify, like I said, self-defensive violence, etc. But I am relatively comfortable with the term pacifist as long as I can explain what I mean by that.

R: Can acts of violence ever be justified?

U: I think that some acts of violence are normally justified in human society, for example, self-defensive violence. So if somebody's running at me with a knife and saying, 'I'm going to kill you! I'm going to kill you!', and I pull a gun and shoot them dead, then most people are going to justify the lethal violence that I used. So I think that, on the face of it, for sure, there are some forms of

violence that are justified, and that our society tends to justify quite normally. On the other hand, I think there are some forms of violence that our society justifies normally that are completely unjustified. For example, most forms of warfare or all forms of warfare, in fact – all forms of state-sponsored organised violence. It is the case that there are some forms of violence that are justifiable. I think that what matters is less determining in advance rules for when it's justified. And what's more important is that an engagement in violence should only be done based on a conscientious and clear thinking - rather than something that is glorified or fetishised.

But I think the main problem in discussions of violence is that the question of what it is is conflated with whether it is justified. Most people talk about whether an act is violent or non-violent, where they should be talking about whether it's justified or not justified. Is breaking a window being violent or not? That question assumes that violence is automatically disqualified, so we try to argue that it's not actually violence - because it doesn't harm, because it doesn't this or that. But I don't think that's a genuine way of discussing the matter. It doesn't separate the two questions. So we need to define violence and then ask if it's ever justified.

So in defining violence I think that we have to go beyond looking harm, because there are forms of, say, psychological harm can be verified in that way. Any activity that deliberately causes harm - it's too wide. I think that a corporation that allows the continuation of selling of medicine of its own that is know to be dangerous in a third world country - it's doing something very unethical, very wrong, that it should be accountable for, but I don't think that act is violence. Prototypical violence is physical violence, but it's also psychological violence. So I think violence should be defined, actually, according to the experience of the receiving side, and an act is violent if it is perceived by its receiver as an attack or as deliberate endangerment. So I think that smashing car windows in the middle of the night when no one notices - or if people stay asleep. It may not be justified, but it's not violent. If people wake up and think that their houses are being broken into and feel threatened and so on, then it certainly is violent. So it's also contextual.

Is violence justified or not justified? I think that arguments that try to show that anarchists should, because of their values, completely oppose violence – I think that ultimately they fail. I think that anarchists also need to stay away from very slippery slope justifications. For example, the generalisation of the self-defence argument, which is: Everybody accepts violence self-defence against a lethal attack. I think that's normal in all of society, right? But trying to extend that to a general legitimization of violence because it's the violence of the oppressed class against their oppressors in every instance is a slippery slope.

R: Could you explain why you think it's a slippery slope justification?

This kind of generalization, to say that any slave is justified in using violence against its oppressors, 'We're all slaves, hence we're all justified' – that's something that's inexact, it's a cop-out. It fails to differentiate between metaphorical slavery and the real thing. Slavery means that you have no rights, that you're subject to being killed if you run away. That's not the situation of even the lowliest contract worker. So I think anarchists should avoid using kind of easy generalisations in order to give themselves less of a moral dilemma. The dilemma on violence is a real dilemma. It's one that we have to confront. It's a stake that we have to actually play. We have to have serious soul searching about whether one or another form of action is one that sits comfortably or not with our values, with our way of life, with our way of thinking. And I think that we

should avoid any kind of easy answer or comfortable argument that simply makes violating other human beings more palatable for us.

R: What motivates a lot of anarchists to commit acts of violence?

U: I don't know. I haven't gone and talked to them all that I can give a proper answer to that. I think that the violence committed by anarchists is infinitesimal in comparison to the violence committed by governments. A few smashed windows, or a couple of stones thrown at police – I don't think that this is something very serious, so I don't even see why today it's worth even commenting on.

R: Do you think the confrontational tactics some anarchists use in mass demonstrations – smashing the windows of banks and corporate outlets, fighting the police in the streets, etc. – give anarchism a negative reputation?

U: Depends among whom. I think that people who are afraid of any eruptive and unforeseen action that breaks the rules of normality and is an expression of anger – people who are afraid of that will have a bad idea of anarchism as a result. People who already have no sympathy for banks and corporations to begin with might be encouraged by these actions. I think that anarchists are justified in putting forward in action - and not only in word - a radical critique of the institutions that they oppose. I think that expressions of rage, if they don't involve harming unarmed human beings are legitimate as long as they're done socially and with good thinking. Ultimately, anarchists have to ask themselves: 'Is it our goal to win over more people to our cause, or is it just our goal to extend and enhance the militancy of protests?' And they have to choose their tactics accordingly.

R: Do violent acts encourage the state to expand and strengthen its repressive machinery?

U: I think the state wants to extend its repressive machinery in any event, and is only limited in how much it does so by the amount of civil resistance that it meets. So, on the contrary, I think that a population that is clearly prepared to defend its rights and is not intimidated by shows of brute force by the state is more likely to prevent an extension of these capabilities by the state.

R: At the end of last year, the Tory party headquarters in London was destroyed during a protest against increasing university tuition fees. Would you define this as an act of violence?

U: Probably yes. I mean presuming like – I think I mentioned this before, but my definition of violence is that an act is violent if it is perceived by its recipient as an attack or a deliberate endangerment. And I presume that there were some people there or in the vicinity that perceived it as such. So, if that's the case, then it may well have been an act of violence. But this is one that I would probably consider justified violence.

R: Why do you think it was justified?

U: Because, as far as I know at least, it didn't involve any harm to any unharmed persons, and because the gain that it achieved in terms of displaying the seriousness of the movement and its

militancy and in terms of probably garnering sympathy amongst large parts of the British population were worth it and made it effective.

R: Some argued that by destroying the headquarters the protesters played right into the hands of politicians and the corporate media. What do you think about this?

U: I think that the media will always find some excuse to defame social movements, and politicians will always find some excuse to do so. I'm not sure, and I don't have any statistics to prove it, but I think that the destruction of the Tory headquarters was something that made a lot of people smile in Britain. I think that the vast majority of the population may have not wanted to do it themselves, but they were probably going, 'Yeah!' They were pretty glad that somebody did it. The press is going to inevitably present social movements as naïve and stupid at best, and dangerous and subversive and sinister at worst. I don't think it's a question of playing into anybody's hands, because if they hadn't done that then the press would have found another reason to defame them.

R: Do you have any thoughts on the riots that took place in London recently?

U: I wasn't there. I wasn't even in Britain at the time, so I can hardly comment on something from so many miles away. I don't want to. I didn't get the impression that the London riots were the work of an organised political movement, but that by itself doesn't detract from the legitimacy of the rage that they expressed. I think that a lot of people, especially young people, especially people from underprivileged populations of Britain today feel that they have no future, feel that society is leaving them behind, and they feel they have no stake in what's going on. I don't think that there's anything that government or anybody else should do in order to rectify the situation. I think it's simply a symptom of the malaise of capitalism in general and the way in which this society is becoming more and more recognised by those who live in it as one that exists in order to maintain the privilege of the few. So even if those riots weren't informed by a well thought-out political analysis, I think they still represented a very genuine sentiment of revolt against a society that doesn't give any benefits to most of those who live in it.

R: Another topic you explore in the main part of the book is technology. What kind of a relationship do anarchists have with technology?

U: An ambivalent one. Historically, at least, we've had some anarchists – I think most anarchists really - until the second part of the 20th century saw technology as oppressive under capitalist society, but not necessarily so. They thought that once technology was liberated from its capitalist fetters it could be harnessed for the benefit of everybody, and would usher in a society that was technologically sophisticated but socially equal.

R: What are some of the arguments for and against technology within the anarchist movement?

U: The situation I've been describing has been changing in the last decade, particularly as a result of the fact that the environmental movement was such an important source and the background for many anarchists. I think that many anarchists today have the opposing view, whereby technology is essentially an oppressive apparatus that has dynamics of domination built into it – technologies that encourage centralisation, and large-scale, and wastefulness, and command and

control systems and/or competition. So it seems to me that there is today a certain divergence of opinions as to the essence of technology.

R: Are you for or against technology?

U: I think that we need to take a critique of technology that isn't generalising and views all technology as essentially positive or essentially negative. I think that we need to look at specific technologies and ask: 'Do they encourage centralisation and hierarchy, or do they encourage decentralisation and equality?' I think that for most of the technological apparatus that surrounds us today – our energy grids, our social arrangements, our production mechanisms, and so on – belong to the first kind that encourage hierarchy and encourage centralisation. There are also forms of technology that are much more decentralising in character. They're much more accessible to people. They're much easier to maintain and fix and even produce without a lot of expertise. They don't encourage a lot of dependency. In this I follow the theorist of technology Langdon Winner, who wrote a very interesting book back in the mid 80s – it's called 'The Whale and the Reactor'. And he offers there a very comprehensive theory of technology that, first of all, says that it's not neutral. It has politics built into it. But that those politics can be both encouraging of centralisation, or decentralising in nature. And I think anarchists need to be exposed to that way of thinking in order to have a more sophisticated critique.

R: You mention anarcho-primitivism in your discussion of technology. Could you tell us what it is?

U: Anarcho-primitivism is a current of anarchist thinking, writing, and action that goes quite beyond the specific issue of technology. It has a general critique of hierarchical society that doesn't only look at industrial capitalism, but at civilisation as a whole, going back to agriculture and the earliest forms of the state as already essentially based on domination and hierarchy and so on. It's a form of anarchist thinking which tends to see technology in a monolithic way, as a largely exploitative and dominating apparatus, and which looks to the ways of life and cultures of hunting and gathering peoples - whether prehistoric ones, or the few examples that still exist - as examples of primitive anarchy that are something to be either emulated or at least made a source of inspiration for how we should live. It's a tendency that I think is most popular in the North-Western United States. There are other areas where it's quite popular. I'd say that in the British and Spanish anarchist movements you find some of these ideas circulating quite widely.

R: What do you think of anarcho-primitivism?

I'm quite sympathetic to that form of thinking. I definitely think that we need to criticise hierarchical society as such and not only in its capitalist form. I also think that agriculture, and the rise of semi-states, and organised religion, and the nuclear family, and so on, in the Middle East around 10,000 years ago do represent a fundamental break in human history, and a move away from what was indeed a form of primitive anarchy – a classless, stateless society without slavery and armies and so on in hunting and gathering communities. I am quite sympathetic to this way of thinking. But the one critique that I do have is that this is a way of thinking that tends to view technology in quite a monolithic way, and doesn't have the kind of fine-grained political analysis of it that I propose in 'Anarchy Alive', which I think most primitivists would not object to as such.

R: Do you think it is hypocritical for those anarchists who are opposed to technology to also use it?

U: Well, no. First of all, it's not anymore hypocritical than to have a bank account, or to fly occasionally, or to pay income tax, or to any participation in the system you oppose so completely you can be seen as hypocritical. There's a line from the Crime Think Collective in the United States that I like. They say: 'We will stop at nothing, not even hypocrisy.' I really like that because it takes a kind of joyous attitude to this issue.

Look, what can you do? If you're living in a society where you're opposed to 90% of the social structures that exist in it, then inevitably you're going to participate in some of them. You have to live with that. You should at least not participate in the most important ones, like not serve in an army, or not actively work a job where you exploit people, or hire other people to work for you – these kinds of things, which I think are minimal. Beyond that, everyone has to make their own judgments and draw their own red lines. I think that expecting anarchists to completely, 100%, withdraw themselves from any participation in capitalism or the state is to consign them to irrelevance. I think it's quite hypocritical of people who don't support anarchism to make that criticism - of people continuing to do things that they themselves do every day without thinking twice.

R: How important is the internet to the anarchist movement?

U: I think it is as important as it is to any other social movement or social group today. In addition, things like open publishing platforms, for example, which are a mainstay of the internet today, were actually developed by anarchist hackers, and actually used for the first time through the Indymedia network during the protests in Seattle. So I think anarchists have been at the forefront of some of the more innovative and democratizing or decentralizing features of the internet, as well as important players in the free software movement and the open source movement. It's not only how important the internet has been for anarchists, but also how important anarchists have been for the internet.

R: Do you think we could we have the level of technological innovation and development we have now in a decentralized anarchist society?

U: I don't think so, no. I don't think that without a profit motive or without military competition – I can't see how a society is supposed to come up with a new computer model every other week, or with things like a space exploration program. I think that a society that isn't predominated by economic growth and competition will definitely also include a slow-down or stoppage or even roll-back of the level of technological sophistication. But I think that's a worthwhile price to pay for much higher levels of freedom and equality in our society.

R: Towards the end of your discussion of technology, you talk about permaculture. Could you tell us what that is?

U: Permaculture is a sort of ecological design system that tries to emulate processes that happen in natural systems in our constructed systems. It can be a food production or a living arrangement, or any kind of project or plan. So it's about: doing things like closing cycles and using every output as an input into another process and seeing every waste product as a resource for something

else; thinking about how different elements can fulfill the same function and how each element can fulfill different functions. It's kind of a design system that tries to emulate the functioning and the resilience of natural systems.

R: What's your opinion of it?

U: I think it's a very useful way of redesigning our world to sustain a growing population, to provide more resources and less waste for everybody, to do things more locally and more cooperatively. I think it's a very useful skill-set and something that is a good example of a technology – if we still want to call it that – which is decentralizing and empowering in nature, because it's easy to learn, it's easy to use, it doesn't require expertise and it puts much more power in local hands.

R: The last topic you explore in the book is the situation in Palestine and Israel. Are there many Israeli and Palestinian anarchists?

U: Well, Israeli Jews – I'd count them at between two and three hundred. There is no organized anarchist movement in Palestinian society. There are a few individual sympathizers, something like that. But the secular left is kind of half Marxist, half nationalist.

R: Do anarchists support the establishment of a Palestinian state? Is it contradictory for them to do so?

U: Well, I can't really answer that about anarchists in general. I can tell you my own opinion. My own opinion is that it is possible to support the establishment of a Palestinian state. It's possible to do it without contradiction. But I don't really think it's really important to do so. Why do I think that it's not a contradiction? Because anarchists oppose the state as an institution, as a form of arranging life, not one or another state. The number of states in the world doesn't really make a difference in those terms – it's the state as a form of social life. The Palestinians are already under the control of a state: Israel. If they become under control of a Palestinian state instead of the Israeli state, then from a purely anti-statist perspective – at worst it's as bad. And probably a little bit better, because a Palestinian state, no matter how democratic or corrupt would be better than direct military occupation.

I think it is possible to support it without even theoretical contradiction. But I don't think it's really important because anarchist support or lack of support for a Palestinian state has nil impact on decision makers, on politicians who are not exactly asking us our opinion. And it's also not very relevant to everyday activities – things like accompanying Palestinian reformers who go to harvest their olives, and being there if and when they get attacked by settlers and the army just stands by and does nothing; or participating in Palestinian demonstrations against the theft of their land by the wall. These acts of solidarity on the ground – removing road blocks, riding with ambulances, whatever – they don't really depend on support or non-support for a state. It's an issue that is kind of quite tangential and sideways to the activity that anarchists engage in on the ground in Palestine.

It's not very important either. In terms of the opinions among Israeli anarchists, I think probably all of them see the only real solution as a no-state solution – the Middle East without borders where we destroy all of the weapons and there are no classes, and so on. Some of them could live with a

two-state agreement and some of them prefer a single democratic state. But these things are not extremely relevant to the everyday activities on the ground anyway.

R: You say in the last chapter that you support joint Israeli-Palestinian efforts to liberate Palestine. Could you explain why?

U: I think that all people who oppose the occupation should work together, and Israelis who believe that it is their duty to stand in solidarity with the most oppressed parts of the population in this land - including Palestinians, including refugees, including unemployed and homeless people, etc. – should be there doing that. A joint Israeli-Palestinian movement also sends out a very important message internationally, because it shows that it's not about Israelis versus Palestinians in a kind of black and white way, where you have to choose sides.

Instead it shows that there is a group of people from both nationalities that are standing shoulder to shoulder, working together, for a better future for everybody. I think that's a really important counter-measure to the polarizing, divisive language that views what goes on in the Middle East as some kind of essential battle between Jews and Arabs, or that views it in religious terms. That's obviously not true. What's going on here is a struggle about dignity, about land, about rights, about water, about livelihoods. And so, this joint struggle is a very good example of how people can transgress these artificial borders that are put between them by the rulers - borders of nationality, of race, of religion, of language, geographical borders, physical borders, fences and checkpoints and roadblocks, and so on. They can transgress them. They can work together despite them. They can really cooperate as comrades – not in a kind of naïve peace-building way that ignores the inequality, but in a way that takes full account and full responsibility for that inequality, and nevertheless does what it can in order to oppose the same inequality that it starts from.

R: Before we started the interview, you told me that a pdf file of 'Anarchy Alive' is available to download for free. Could you tell us where it can be found?

U: <http://zinelibrary.info/anarchy-alive>

R: Okay, Uri, thanks for talking to me.

U: Thank you for this opportunity for talking about the book and all of the ideas in it.

R: 'Anarchy Alive! Anti-Authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory' is published by Pluto Press.

The address of Uri Gordon's website is anarchyalive.com.

This interview was conducted by Richard Capes for the blogsite moretht.blogspot.com and recorded on the 7th November 2011. Thank you for listening.